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**The Specter of Climate Refugees:  
Why Invoking Refugees as a Reason to “Take Climate Change Seriously” is  
Troubling**

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The argument is often made that climate change needs to be taken seriously because it will trigger “climate refugees” that will threaten international borders. This is now a common refrain in a wide array of arguments about climate change – not only from “dark green” environmentalists or mainstream climate scientists, but also from national security officials.

For example, in a speech delivered in Alaska in September 2015, US President Barack Obama pointed to the melting Arctic as a matter of national security for the United States and highlighted that climate refugees and migration are a particular threat.

There’s not going to be a nation on this Earth that’s not impacted negatively [by climate change]. People will suffer. Economies will suffer. Entire nations will find themselves under severe, severe problems. More drought; more floods; rising sea levels; greater migration; more refugees; more scarcity; more conflict.

Obama added, in apocalyptic tones, an explicit reference to cross-border refugees:

...[I]f we do nothing to keep the glaciers from melting faster, and oceans from rising faster, and forests from burning faster, and storms from growing stronger, we will condemn our children to a planet beyond their capacity to repair: Submerged countries. Abandoned cities. Fields no longer growing. Indigenous peoples who can’t carry out traditions that stretch back millennia. Entire industries of people who can’t practice their livelihoods. Desperate refugees seeking the sanctuary of nations not their own. Political disruptions that could trigger multiple conflicts around the globe (Obama September 1, 2015).

Such invocations can obviously appeal to fearful electorates anxious about national security as it pertains to immigrants and refugees. Not only is there close media coverage of Europe’s 2015-2016 refugee crisis and the proposal to build a wall on the Mexican border, but the public is also exposed to popular movies and novels that have the dystopic trope of hordes of refugees assaulting borders. Movies such as *Children of Men* (2006), *Elysium* (2013), and *Snowpiercer* (2014) feature scenes of desperate refugees straining security barriers. As Drezner (2014) suggests, one might even consider *World War Z* (2013) and its depictions of border assault by implacable zombies as an example of this public imaginary. Young adult literature such as *The Hunger Games* franchise or literature by celebrated novelists Margaret Atwood and Barbara Kingsolver have also used displaced peoples in their imaginings of the future.

This essay argues, first, that viewing climate change as a threat multiplier that will produce “climate refugees” is problematic because it unduly accentuates migrants and refugees as an ostensible security threat. Second, it asserts that the evidence of large numbers of people moving toward borders in the past (and in the future) because of environmental change remains empirically questionable. Third and finally, it claims that such discourse distracts attention from more fruitful policy responses. There is no doubt that climate change is a very real phenomenon and a deep menace to the ecosystems in which humans and other species exist. Solving its challenges have been

and will be hard enough. Nevertheless, injecting refugee and migration politics into the debate unproductively furthers an agenda focused on militarized border security.

### Evolution of the Discourse

In the early 1990s, scholars and policymakers argued that the environment and climate change presented challenges to national security (Gore 1992; Homer-Dixon 1991; Deligiannis 2013). The North Atlantic security establishment itself was initially resistant to this expansion of security beyond its traditional focus on strategic doctrine and force projection. In the late 90s, however, European defense ministries began to articulate that climate change did indeed pose a national security threat. And by the mid-00s, the Pentagon and US security establishment began to join the argument that climate change was a security concern, specifically citing climate refugees as one of the clear threats (Schwartz and Randall 2003).

In its early years, the Bush-Cheney White House and its Republican counterparts in Congress denied that climate change was a real phenomenon. Nevertheless, security bureaucracies and think tanks in Washington increasingly asserted that not only was it real, but that it also presented security challenges (Campbell and others 2007). By 2008, the last year of the Bush-Cheney Administration, the Director of National Intelligence released a National Intelligence Assessment on the *Implications of Climate Change to 2030*. It, too, pointed to climate refugees as a particular threat to international and national security (National Intelligence Council 2008). Other North Atlantic security bodies promulgated similar reports (Solana and European Commission 2008; German Advisory Council on Global Change 2007; Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre of the UK Ministry of Defence 2007).

The reasoning for these arguments is rather straightforward and seemingly intuitive. Although the future scope and dimensions of climate change is unpredictable, its impact will nonetheless be significant. The logic seems to follow, then, that deterioration in ecosystems will displace people and prompt them to move toward international borders. Whether labeled environmental refugees, climate migrants, climate-induced migration, or sometimes even “climigrants,” this displacement would likely emerge from three causes. First, the increased incidences of catastrophic events such as typhoons or hurricanes would devastate communities; second, coastal or island inundations would render land uninhabitable; and, third, gradual onset climate change in the form of drought would undermine livelihoods (Bates 2002).

Not surprisingly, the environmental left has found this kind of discourse appealing. It had long argued à la Homer-Dixon that environmental change prompted displacement and conflict (El-Hinnawi 1985; Black 2001; Kibreab 1997). Climate change as a particular kind of environmental change is (and would be in this logic) a new set of “forcings” that would deeply accelerate such dynamics. Estimates of the future displacement ranged from 200 million people to as many as one billion, with time horizons often uncertain (Myers 2001; Christian Aid 2007; International Organization for Migration 2008).

And once the North Atlantic security establishment started to take up the argument, as noted above, environmentalists subsequently cited the official reports as confirmation of climate change’s empirical validity. If the Pentagon is “taking climate change seriously,” so went the reasoning, others should, too. After all, no one could accuse the security establishment of being anti-capitalist or naïve tree huggers.

For environmentalists passionate about social justice, the argument that climate change would unduly affect vulnerable peoples is especially compelling because it accentuates the deep inequalities at the heart of the international political economy. The fact that greenhouse gases are overwhelmingly emitted by advanced-industrialized

countries and would cause the dislocation of hundreds of millions of people raises crucial humanitarian questions and/or R2P-style obligations. In some instances, climate refugees have even been depicted as the “human face of climate change” in an attempt to humanize climate change’s impact. Michael Nash’s 2010 documentary film *Climate Refugees* is a perfect example of that genre although it, too, ultimately emphasizes climate refugees as a security threat.

### Pitfalls

Holding aside for the moment the question of the empirical evidence for displacement attributable to climate change – addressed below – why would it be a problem if national security establishments adopted neo-Malthusian arguments and treated climate change as a “threat multiplier” (Levy 1995; Smith 2007; Dalby, 2009)? The reason is that framing climate change as a national security issue gives rise to an “anticipatory regime” that neither contributes to policies to *mitigate* greenhouse gases nor promotes *adaptation* to already occurring and future climate change (Hartmann 2014). It sets in motion a future-oriented logic that assumes the worst, thereby enhancing the potential for a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, thinking in terms of the worst-case scenario is itself the worst-case scenario. As Adams, Murphy and Clarke write:

Anticipatory regimes offer a future that may or may not arrive, is always uncertain and yet is necessarily coming and so therefore always demanding a response... Anticipation is not just betting on the future; it is a moral economy in which the future sets the conditions of possibility for action in the present, in which the future is inhabited in the present.

Through anticipation, the future arrives as already formed in the present, as if the emergency has already happened (Adams et al., 2009, 236).

This notion of “the future [setting] the conditions of possibility for action in the present... as if the emergency has already happened” is exactly the fearful, catastrophist vibe that securitized discourse seeks to deploy. It endeavors to make an apocalyptic future as happening *right now* and immediately locked in emergency. Injunctions are invoked in ethical terms: we must be prepared, vigilant, and alert; the “perpetual ethicized state of imperfect knowing” renders us obedient (Adams et al., 2009, 254). It can also cultivate an acceptance of anxious preparedness and even violence as a political stance.

Again, thinking of climate refugees as an inevitable outgrowth of climate change does not lead to political support for the mitigation of GHGs nor adaptation to climate change “already in the pipeline.” The more likely response is a platform of policies such as enhancing border security, bolstering authoritarian “transit states” on the periphery of advanced-industrialized countries, and maintaining force projection capabilities in order to respond to “hotspots” with displaced populations.

The steady deepening of border security over the last 25 years is suggestive of this process. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, countries have vigorously pursued the construction of fences, walls, and high-tech surveillance as a means of asserting control over borders (Brown 2010; Andersson 2014). Although these structures have obviously not been erected in the name of stopping “climate refugees,” an anticipatory regime built on their portent will only reaffirm their political appeal. Climate refugees fit neatly into the “rhetorical amalgamation” and interchangeable anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and anti-terrorist discourses that serve to legitimate walls (Vallet and David, 2014). Military and security firms that provide border security often lobby assiduously for contracts from governments (Lemberg-Pederson 2013). Their goal is to politically legitimate the necessity of the services they provide and, in effect, create the need for their own business (Buxton and Hayes, 2015).

A recent example of this dangerous rhetoric is US presidential candidate Donald Trump's rally cry of "I will build a great wall and have Mexico pay for it." Trump has denied the mainstream scientific evidence that climate change is occurring. And his justification for a wall is a shifting potpourri of thwarting economic migrants, repelling refugees, and fighting ISIS. But when he and others in his ideological formation do concede that climate change is happening, enhanced walled security against climate refugees will inevitably be the logical outgrowth.

"Transit countries" on the periphery of advanced-industrialized countries – e.g., Mexico, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Turkey – have also long been enlisted in efforts to interdict migrants seeking access to the US and EU. Such countries have traded their cooperation on migration interdiction for economic assistance and preferential terms of trade. In the case of countries like Morocco and Turkey, they have parlayed their roles as transit states to deepen their diplomatic credential (Kimball 2007; White 2011; Düvell 2012). The case of Libya's Qaddafi and his cooperation on migration interdiction from 2003-2011 especially illustrates its precarious and contradictory nature. And the April 2016 deal between the EU and Turkey, in which Turkey agreed to take back migrants from Greece in exchange for financial aid and the right for Turkish citizens to travel in the Schengen zone for 90 days without a visa is also part of this fraught process. The domestic politics of transit states are becoming more authoritarian, in no small part because of efforts by North Atlantic powers to externalize borders.

### Uncertain Empirical Evidence

What is especially problematic (and perhaps even ironic) in using a threat-defense logic for climate refugees is that scholarship in migration and demography has indicated that people affected by environmental change – whether it be gradual onset climate change or catastrophic events – are actually *less* able or inclined to move (Henry, Schoumaker, and Beauchemin 2004; Massey, Axinn, and Ghimire 2007; Perch-Nielsen, Bättig, and Imboden 2008). Migrating great distances requires physical strength and economic resources, something that most people affected by environmental change rarely have. The literature also argues that people who do move because of environmentally-induced displacement tend to either return to their homes to rebuild or, if they are unable to do so, move to nearby cities or destinations (Gray 2010; Gray 2009).

There is empirical evidence that climate change can indeed contribute to or exacerbate conflict (Dumaine and Mintzer, 2015). It would be naïve to assume otherwise. But, if people seek "the sanctuary of nations not their own," as President Obama worried, it is often in nearby poor countries – not distant advanced-industrialized countries.

Two brief examples illustrate the complexity of this issue. First, the 2006 drought in Syria – an occurrence strongly correlated to climate change – undoubtedly helped to catalyze the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. And some analysts have linked the drought to the 2015-16 European refugee crises. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that sophisticated analyses emphasize that the drought was a *contributing* ecological factor and not the sole cause of the civil conflict (Kelley et al., 2015). Other factors are far more salient – i.e., Hafez and Bashar al-Assad regimes' economic and social policies over many decades, international interventions (namely, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003), the aftermath of the 2008 fiscal crisis and international food commodity prices, and the spreading upheavals associated with 2011 Arab spring (Randall, 2016; Femia and Werrell, 2012). Also, in keeping with the argument above, the vast bulk of Syrian refugees have stayed within the region; they cannot or do not want to leave Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. They are not straining European borders.

A second example is the Sahel region of Africa and its experience with climate change. Tom Friedman's April 2016 trilogy of articles in the *New York Times* had the clichéd title, "Out of Africa." Friedman's articles are peppered with phrases like "surging migrant tide" and "one way or another [Africans] will try to get to Europe" and "the headwaters of the immigration flood [are] now flowing from Africa to Europe via Libya" and "when the US and NATO toppled [Qaddafi] they essentially uncorked Africa." Not only do the articles perfectly illustrate an alarmist, neo-Malthusian anticipatory regime (Verhoeven, 2014), they are scant on empirical evidence about the impact of climate change on migration patterns. The third article begins, "You can learn everything you need to know about the main challenge facing Africa today by talking to just two people in Senegal: the rapper and the weatherman." Would that it were so simple.

As argued above, most displaced peoples in sub-Saharan Africa do *not* move northward toward Europe but instead move south to the Gulf of Guinea, straining the massive urban centers along the Atlantic (Andersson, 2014). This represents profound challenges for human security and sustainable development – and potential humanitarian challenges, too. Friedman does explicitly write that he is not advocating the building of walls around the North Atlantic. Nevertheless, hyping the African "migration wave," as he does unfortunately abets support for border agencies such as Frontex or the US Customs and Border Protection.

### Conclusion

In *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*, Oreskes and Conway cleverly imagine a Chinese historian writing 300 years in the future. Their fictional historian recounts the ecological ravages that took place in the late 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Although records for this period are incomplete, it is likely that during the Mass Migration [in the 2070s], 1.5 billion people were displaced around the globe, either directly from the impacts of sea level rise or indirectly from other impacts of climate change, including the secondary dislocation of inland peoples whose towns and villages were overrun by eustatic refugees [i.e., rising seas]. Dislocation contributed to the Second Black Death, as a new strain of the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* emerged in Europe and spread to Asia and North America (Oreskes and Conway 2014, 70).

It is an apocalyptic, biblical-style narrative of what *will* happen: floods, plagues, and, yes, hordes of refugees dislocated because of climate change.

Obviously, refugees and migrations have long been a hot-button issue in advanced-industrialized countries. To invoke environmental refugees or climate-induced migration as a threat or concern is not only empirically questionable, but it also prompts a threat-defense logic that merges into anti-immigrant and anti-refugee discourses.

Some suggest that the exclusionary tendency implicit in a security turn for climate refugees has a racial dimension (Baldwin 2013; Baldwin 2012a; Baldwin 2012b) while others argue that nativist frameworks align with notions of defending civilization against invading barbarian hordes (Bettini 2013, 63-72). The rise of Trump and other anti-immigrant rightwing parties show that popular sentiment is certainly susceptible to fear mongering about refugees. If/when the political right becomes fully convinced that climate change is real – likely via arguments from defense bureaucracies and contractors – it will surely embrace the "climate refugee" line of argument. Further support for a politics of climate change based on exclusionary nativism and a militarized survivalism will undoubtedly follow.

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